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Barnes to work pro bono pro

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Steven Gottlieb thought it was a joke when he checked his voicemail and heard Gov. Roy Barnes saying he wanted to come to work for the Atlanta Legal Aid Society.

"How would you like to have a lawyer for six months?" Barnes asked the executive director. At least, it sounded like Barnes.

Gottlieb, who was vacationing in New Zealand, asked his secretary to check it out. She confirmed the unbelievable --- it was Barnes, and the offer was legit.

"I've never heard of a former governor going to work for a legal aid program," said Gottlieb. "I take that as an incredible compliment."

Two days after the news leaked out, Barnes confirmed Tuesday he will go to work for the nonprofit group for six months, donating his time to handle cases on behalf of low-income Georgians. Barnes, speaking at a press conference attended by Gottlieb, said his first priority has always been to look out for Georgians' interests.

"Holding elective office is not the only way to help others," said Barnes, an attorney who helped found a high-profile law firm in Marietta before winning the governor's race in 1998.

The move could also help Barnes clean up the "King Roy" image that dogged him during his re-election campaign and contributed to his surprise loss to Sonny Perdue on Nov. 5. Asked about his legacy Tuesday, Barnes was cautious: "I'm not a big one on legacy; that's up to others to determine."

Political consultant Rick Dent said it is unlikely that Barnes is attempting to remake his image, especially since it could be construed as a negative by those who believe Barnes is liberal.

"I think it's refreshing to see someone leave public office and not cash in, and do something he really does care about," said Dent, who served as spokesman for Democratic Gov. Zell Miller in the 1990s.

Legal aid's volunteer lawyers work on behalf of low-income clients who often don't have access to the legal system. The group's lawyers handle only civil cases.

Barnes first got to know the organization while working to protect borrowers from so-

called "predatory lenders." Legal aid lawyers helped Barnes write and pass legislation this year regulating certain high-cost loans.